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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this paper on reading instruction is to inform teachers and parents of the superiority of phonics or code-based approaches over the whole-word method (still the dominant method in the United States). The first section deals with the nature of reading skills, the second section covers the history and present status of the reading problem in United States schools, and the third section contains four articles which discuss dyslexia, the initial teaching alphabet, reading achievement test scores, and remedial reading. An annotated list of effective phonics programs and an annotated bibliography conclude the paper. (JM)

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Phonics in Beginning Reading:

A Guide for Teachers and Parents

- The Nature of Reading Skill
- The Reading Problem in American Schools
- Some Current Issues in Reading
- A List of Effective Phonics Programs
- Selected Bibliography

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Phonics in Beginning Reading: A Guide for Teachers and Parents

INTRODUCTION

In September 1969 U.S. Commissioner of Education James E. Allen, Jr., delivered an address in which he called for the erasing of an "intolerable deficit" in American education. He was referring to what many consider the number one problem in our public schools, the fact that so many young people read poorly or not at all. After describing some of the "shocking facts" which show how widespread reading deficiencies are, he called for a nationwide attack on the reading problem and expressed the hope that by the end of the 70's the "right to read" would be firmly established.

This *Occasional Paper* is offered by the Council for Basic Education as part of its contribution to the improvement of reading instruction. Reading has been one of the Council's interests since its founding in 1956, an interest which prompted a major book in the field (*Tomorrow's Illiterates*, 1961), many articles in the *CBE Bulletin*, and articles in various magazines by CBE staff members. The contents of this paper are drawn for the most part from this material.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section, consisting of an article by John C. Daniels and Hunter Diack, deals with the nature of the reading skill. Although written nine years ago, it remains one of the best statements of the subject, scholarly and lucid, and without the obtrusive paraphernalia and jargonistic language often found in such statements. The second section covers the history and present status of the reading problem in American schools. The third section contains four articles not directly concerned with phonics but covering topics of widespread current interest: dyslexia, the initial teaching alphabet, reading achievement test scores, and remedial reading. The fourth and fifth sections, consisting of a listing of some effective phonics programs and a bibliography, were prepared especially for this paper.

to be in favor of improvement, undefined. Current well-intentioned efforts will amount to little until we face up to the fact that some approaches to the teaching of reading are better than others. Children learn to read much more readily when they are taught by sound and rational methods. Learning research, the practice of competent teachers, and common sense suggest that the most efficient method in teaching beginning reading is one that provides a simple code for unlocking words, a code which teaches the beginner the sounds the letters make. Although this paper describes the history of past follies in reading theory and practice, its primary purpose is the constructive one of informing teachers and parents of the superiority of phonics- or code-based approaches over the whole-word method, which is still the dominant one in American schools. Our present predicament is one, fortunately, from which we can extricate ourselves.

JOHN C. DANIELS is Deputy Director, and HUNTER DIACK is Senior Tutor and Joint Acting Director, of the Institute of Education, University of Nottingham in England. This article appeared as a chapter in *Tomorrow's Illiterates*, published by Atlantic-Little, Brown. Copyright © 1961 by the Council for Basic Education.

THE NATURE OF READING SKILL

by

John C. Daniels

and

Hunter Diack

Reading and Learning to Read

Some of the most enlightening questions are those which it seems hardly necessary to ask. The question: "What is reading?" is one of these. If the currently orthodox answer were completely satisfactory, the further question of how to *teach* reading would not still be so controversial. The view that has, during the last forty years, come to be regarded as orthodox, in the field of teacher-training at least, is that *reading is "thought getting."* E. A. Betts writes, typically: "Reading is a language process rather than a subject. In a psychological sense, reading is a thinking process. In another sense reading is a 'social process' that 'relates the reader to his environment and conditions that relationship.'. . . Basic consideration should be given to meaning and secondary consideration to the symbols."[1] E. W. Dolch rebukes teachers whose methods, he says, encourage children to believe that "reading is saying what is in the book."[2]

These modern definitions are in marked contrast to the earlier view expressed by Alexander Bain, the philosopher, who wrote in

[1] E. A. Betts, *Foundations of Reading Instruction* (New York: American Book Company, 1957).

[2] E. W. Dolch, *Psychology and Teaching of Reading* (Champaign, Illinois: Garrard Press, 1951).

instance, both from spoken language and from the knowledge attained through speech: it is also distinct from the acquisition of further knowledge through books, although intended to compass that object. It is the art of pronouncing words at sight of the visible characters."[3] Dolch takes the same line as Betts when he writes: "Reading is imagining, thinking and feeling about ideas and thoughts by perception of printed words." Quotations similar to those of Betts and Dolch could be culled from scores of well-known textbooks to be found on every reading expert's shelf.

These statements may seem innocuous, even if they do not take us very far. Certainly the aim of teaching a child to read is to enable him to read letters, books, journals, newspapers, with understanding, with feeling, and with imagination. Indeed, much of his intellectual and emotional development will be based upon his reading experiences. Yet these superficially innocuous definitions *conceal* rather than illuminate certain facts of crucial importance about *learning* to read, and in so doing they have led directly to teaching practices which menace the full, all-round educational development of our children. Half-truths are often as dangerous as lies.

An analogy will perhaps bring out the point more clearly. Let us take the example of learning to drive an automobile. One learns to drive in order to be able to get from one place to another. But is this the immediate aim of someone who is *learning* to drive? Surely not. He often merely drives around the block and a few minutes later is right back where he started from. He drives not to *go* somewhere, but in order to learn to drive.

Similarly, a first-grade child with his reading primer open before him will probably be reading not so much to "get the thoughts" as to learn to read. Certainly he will "get thoughts" in the process—just as the learner-driver does move around the block. But at the *earliest stage*, the "thought getting" is not the sole aim, or even the *main* aim, of his close inspection of the black marks on the paper. The thoughts contained in the first words the child learns to read are not likely to be more interesting or more complex than those he has when thinking "on his own," or when engaged in active exploration of the real world (an activity which is always stimulated and mediated by "inner speech") or when someone else is talking to him. In his ordinary speaking and recall vocabulary he has at his

[3] A. Bain, *Education as a Science* (London: Kegan Paul, 1879).

vocabulary for a considerable time. For this reason, the new extension of his "thought getting" through reading will be limited by his small reading vocabulary. Until his reading ability has reached a definite state, namely, when he is functionally literate, his new "thought getting" will come mainly from the spoken words of others and from other, more active, practical experiences.

The Spoken and the Written Word

The average *speaking* vocabulary of five-year-olds in London, England, was estimated by Watts to be about two thousand words.[4] We have to add several hundred more to obtain the average vocabulary level of the six-year-old first-grade child in America, and further thousands to obtain his total "hearing" vocabulary. Inevitably, therefore, the teacher of a first-grade class is dealing with children who have considerable (and, we think, generally underrated) linguistic experience. This high level of vocabulary and linguistic experience is matched by a wide sensory experience gained through examining and handling objects in the real world and drawing pictures of them. We take it for granted that normally a six-year-old child can distinguish between a cat and a dog. Most of them will even be able to recognize different breeds of dogs. There will be very few of that age who cannot distinguish between a triangle and a square or even between a square and other very similar rectangles. Young eyes have been trained to see similarities and differences. Much of this development is the result of incidental learning, but it is inevitably linked with the growth of his linguistic powers.

Naturally, therefore, it is impossible for a child to spend six active years in a world of flashing neon signs, advertising slogans, comics, public notices, journals, newspapers, and television without seeing and expressing some interest in words in their printed form. Every parent knows how curious preschool children can be about printed words. Children soon realize that printed words have significance for their own lives—they know that printed words help in choosing the preferred breakfast cereal and the right streetcar. This means that in addition to wide experience of seeing real objects and of naming them, the first-grade child normally has an important back-

[4] A. F. Watts, *The Language and Mental Development of Children* (London: Harrap, 1946).

print.

This whole process of how the perceptual abilities (visual, aural, and kinesthetic) of the young child grow is only just beginning to be fully investigated and is clearly too complicated to be dealt with in detail here. There is one important point, however, which it is necessary to make in this context: that the mere presence of the image of anything, a real object, a picture, a word, upon the retina of the eye does not necessarily mean, even with quite normal children, that that thing is *perceived*. For perception to take place, those mental processes we vaguely cover by the word *attention* must also be at work. Many observers have noted that most five-to-six-year-old children brought up in a reasonably literate environment are likely to be able to "recognize" some words even though they may have no idea of the "meaning" or symbolic significance of letters.[5, 6]

"Word-Whole" Patterns

This observation of what is usually described as the child's ability to recognize "whole, unanalyzed word-patterns" lies behind the idea that children should be taught first to recognize "whole-words" to acquire a "sight vocabulary" rather than being taught, following practice which was normal a generation or two ago, first to recognize letters and then later how to combine these letters into the spoken word. In a book published in London in 1958, Nora L. Goddard, an inspector of schools for the London County Council, declared that the fact that children can recognize words even before they know letters is one of the major discoveries of modern educational psychology.[7] This is manifestly untrue. Such nineteenth-century educators as Worcester and Bumstead were already aware of this fact and made use of it. It is of course a fact that a child can, by ordinary conditioning processes, be taught to respond with the correct spoken word to a limited number of printed words without ever being taught to see and recognize letters; no one can deny that children can be taught to *recognize* a limited basic "sight vocabulary."

Confusion has arisen out of the writings of modern reading

[5] J. Duncan, *Backwardness in Reading* (London: Harrap, 1953).

[6] Arthur I. Gates, *The Improvement of Reading* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

[7] N. L. Goddard, *Reading in the Modern Infants' School* (London: University of London Press, 1958).

of the full meaning of the word *recognize* as used in this context. However, this ambiguity about the word *recognize* admirably suited their purposes, for it allowed them to draw far-reaching, and often quite erroneous, conclusions from a series of experiments on word-perception which were very limited in scope and mostly irrelevant to the question under debate. For example, the experiments carried out at the end of the nineteenth century by J. McKeen Cattell[8] and by Erdmann and Dodge[9] have little bearing on the question with which teachers of reading are concerned, because these research workers merely studied how adults, who were all fully literate and practiced readers, perceived words. However, the later observations of Gates and Boeker,[10] Schonell,[11] and others (though it must be said that these investigators singularly failed to recognize the real significance of their own findings) showed that the young child trying to remember the visual form of printed words, before he understands the rational significance of letters, bases his recognition on a vague perception of "general shape" (length, projections, etc.) *plus the recall of one or two more clearly apprehended details.* To use the example quoted by Schonell, a child may remember *monkey* by the vague perception of length and outline shape *plus* a clear apprehension of "the funny tail at the end." E. R. Boyce also speaks of recognition by means of "the two little eyes peeping out of *moon*."[12] Incidentally these are two clear-cut examples of reading experts blessing the process whereby a child is led to recognize English words as if they were ideographs of the Chinese type—a practice to which Bain referred so penetratingly.

Exactly how a young child recognizes any word in his "sight vocabulary" usually remains a mystery to the teacher. Nor does current theory encourage her to try to find out. It is regarded as a sufficient explanation to say that he is responding to the "word-whole." By way of example, however, consider the following case. A three-year-old child, whose knowledge of letters was probably nil,

[8] J. M. Cattell, "The Influence of the Intensity of the Stimulus on the Length of the Reaction Time" (*Brain: A Journal of Neurology*, London, Vol. 8, 1885-1886).

[9] B. Erdmann and R. Dodge, *Psychologische Untersuchunzen über das Lesen* (Halle, 1898).

[10] Arthur I. Gates and E. Boeker, "A Study of Initial Stages in Reading by Pre-school Children" (*Teachers College Record*, New York, November, 1923).

[11] F. J. Schonell, *Backwardness in the Basic Subjects* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1948).

[12] E. R. Boyce, *Learning to Read* (London: Macmillan, 1949).

pictures, the two words *man* and *bus*. Her basic sight vocabulary was thus two words. When she was making perfect responses to these two words she was shown *bun*. She replied: "*Man.*" On being told that was wrong, she vigorously remonstrated that she felt strongly that she was right by pointing to the *n* of *bun*, insisting, "But it *is* man." Most teachers trained in the word-whole theory of perception would have predicted that she would have replied with *bus*—and of course many children put through the same procedure do so. But our example illustrates clearly that what is often interpreted as the recognition of "word-whole" patterns may be more accurately described as "part-seeing and whole-saying." In our research report *Progress in Reading*,[13] in which we analyzed thousands of reading errors, there were very few errors which could not be described in this way—and we have reason to think that many of the *correct* responses were of this nature too.

The New Era

However, the hasty acceptance of the imprecise ideas embodied in the phrase "recognizing words as wholes" and the consequent rejection of the significance of letters have led to something like a revolution in methods of teaching reading in most English-speaking countries of the world. There can be little doubt now that the result has been a serious decline of literacy in these areas. By itself, such a vague concept of what is involved in reading as was embodied in the new theories of reading instruction could never have found such ready and uncritical acceptance, but the new theories were first widely canvassed at the time when there was a favorable conjunction of other developments in education. After 1919, the watchword of progressive education was, for several generations, to be "freedom." Under the influence of John Dewey and his disciples, the concept of a school as a place for the instruction of children was replaced by the idea that a school should be a "laboratory of life" where children would experiment in developing their own talents. Drill methods and rote learning were to be replaced by more active and "insightful" methods of teaching. In future, teachers were to pay due regard to such aspects of learning as self-directed activity, creativity, motivation, and insight. The great educators of the past, even though

[13] J. C. Daniels and H. Diack, *Progress in Reading* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 1956).

quently stressed these and related aspects of learning, but there had been few attempts to put them into practice. The twentieth century, however, saw a concerted effort to do precisely this. It seemed that a new and fertile era in education had dawned, but present discontents show that achievement has fallen far short of this glowing promise.

Gestalt Psychology to the Rescue

At the same time as these "progressive" ideas of education were being propagated, reading experts found considerable support for the theory of the "word-whole" method in the rise of Gestalt psychology.[14] This school of thought emphasized the importance of the *whole* as distinct from the *parts* of which the whole was compounded. The reading experts who brought Gestalt theory into the theory of teaching reading saw in this system of psychology further justification for ignoring letters at the early stages of reading instruction. It is characteristic of books published since Gestalt theory became popular that it is only with the greatest reluctance that a writer on the teaching of reading ever refers to the letters of the alphabet. What one finds in books on modern reading theory is an unending series of references to "word-configurations," "word-gestalten," "general shape," "internal characteristics," and "the general structure of the word." Nowhere in these books is there ever any suggestion that printed words look as they do because particular letters are there in a particular order.

Briefly, there are two points to make on this matter: (1) Gestalt theory was only brought in "after the event," that is, as a pseudo-scientific justification for practices already in being. In any case, there is no evidence in the writings of the leading Gestalt theoreticians that they ever believed that their "discoveries" were a justification for the new methods of teaching reading. On the contrary, if, for example, Wertheimer had applied his theory of working from the whole to the significant part, to the teaching of reading, he would probably have stressed the importance of helping the child to "discover" letters—the significant parts of the whole word in print. (2) Except for its vestigial remains in reading theory and a few of its generalities which were already obvious to common sense, Gestalt psychology is no longer reputable or important. Modern experi-

[14] H. Diack, *Reading and the Psychology of Perception* (Nottingham: Peter Skinner, 1960).

the importance of analysis and synthesis in all mental processes from perception to logical thinking. With the demise of Gestalt psychology goes all scientific justification for the common phrases about children "seeing words as whole, unanalysed word patterns."

But in the 1920's the "new" idea that teachers should encourage the child to "recognize words as wholes" seemed to imply that in the preparation of reading primers, *any words* which were within the child's speaking vocabulary, however long or irregular their spelling, could be used. This "new" concept would, it was felt, release both teachers and pupils from the necessity, which had up to that time been regarded as axiomatic, for children to start either with letters or with short phonically spelled words. Now any word would do. What interesting, exciting books, capturing the child's imagination, could now be written for use as reading primers! "Thought getting" could be the start of reading. It was as if we had discovered a flawless method by which the learner-driver we mentioned above could leap into the driving seat of a Cadillac for the first time and drive solo, speedily and carefree, through Brooklyn.

The Choice of Words for Reading Primers

In practice it turned out to be very different, however. It had been obvious even then that for the first reading books some selection of the child's speaking vocabulary had to be made. No one could possibly suggest that *all* the two thousand or more words in a six-year-old's speaking vocabulary be embodied in the sight vocabulary of his first reading book. It was then found that, though children might be able to learn to recognize words "as wholes," their recall vocabulary of words learned in this way remained extremely limited.

So the need arose, in preparing the new sort of primer, to restrict the number of different words used in each book very drastically. Consequently, these few words had to be repeated as often as possible in the text within the limits imposed by the need for a certain amount of meaning in what the child was going to "read." It is hardly necessary for us to give examples—they are far too common—of how repetitive, boring, and almost meaningless is the reading matter in the "new" primers. Teachers should ask themselves, "Are these books really, after all, interesting to read? Are they indeed any more interesting than the old drill-method phonic primers?"

We believe the honest answer to these questions is no. We be-

of teaching the meanings of letters, reading theorists have led us back . . . to the boring.

These "modern" primers appear to have two main effects upon the children. First, there are some children in the first grade who have already, from their own environmental experiences, gained sufficient experience of looking at printed words to enable them to "remember" twenty or thirty words in a reading primer of this type in a very short time, and who, therefore, find the repetitive content of the books so excessively boring as to prejudice them against reading schoolbooks of any kind whatsoever. Second, there are other children, with less favored backgrounds, who make enough progress in word-recognition to get through the early books in a series with comparative ease, but who, while doing so, acquire wrong habits of word-perception and a wrong idea of what reading is. Later, these wrong habits and ideas seriously interfere with their reading progress.

The extent to which established habits of perception (for example, recognizing words by their length or some adventitious features such as projecting letters) interfere with the acquiring of the mode of perception necessary for real reading is greatly underestimated. Many of the emotional disturbances and frustrated feelings of backward readers arise out of the difficulty many children find in rejecting the old, inefficient mode of word-perception and replacing it with the mode of perception which alphabetic writing necessarily imposes.

We have ourselves encountered in English schools many pupils who, because they could guess accurately the words in their primer (the pictures on each page were a great help in this), imagined that they could read. Some teachers thought this was a good thing. Later, however, when these children passed into the junior school (at the age of seven or eight years), they made the shattering discovery that what they thought was reading was not real reading after all. Not having the essential clue of letter knowledge, they were unable to read books which required the deciphering of words outside their established "sight vocabulary." Here were real backward readers with all the potentiality for personality destruction in the making.

Spoken and Written Words

Because in their theorizing the reading experts lost sight of the basic element of printed language—the letter—it is important to

between the written and the spoken word. In a language like English which is written down by means of an alphabet, printed words acquire both their "general shapes" and their details by reason of the letters of which they are compounded.

The child who is beginning to learn to read has, as we have already stressed, acquired a considerable command of the spoken language. M. M. Lewis and others have traced the process whereby the child learns to build up the elementary units of speech, the phonemes, many of which are in his own spontaneous pattern of infant babbling, into what become meaningful wholes—the spoken words.[15] In one sense, therefore, for the six-year-old, the unit of speech has *become* the word or the phrase. But certainly at the earliest phase, the unit of writing is the letter. We write or type one letter at a time in a particular order; though, at a higher stage of both writing and typing, sequences of letters forming words tend to acquire, through constant practice, an engrammatic quality of "wholeness"—neuromuscular patterns.

Is it true that the unit of reading for the practiced reader is the letter? The obvious answer is no. No one who is reading these words is likely to be very mush aware of the letters of which they are composed unless there is something unexpected in the way one or the other of the words is printed. Those who read the previcus sentence, for example, without noticing the misprint of *mush* for *much* can be quite certain that they were not using the letter as a unit of reading. What in fact happened was that, through inner speech, they told themselves that the word to be expected from the context was *much*, and so close is the relationship between the brain centers associated with speech, hearing, and sight that the events in the visual center of the brain were almost indistinguishable from the events which would have occurred there had the word *much* appeared in its correct spelling.

Once more, however, we must beware of arguing that because the experienced person behaves in a certain way, the learner too will behave in the same way. Before anyone can reach that stage of proficiency in reading at which he is able to ignore some of the letters of the passage he is reading and still "get" the words and the thoughts accurately, he must have acquired a high degree of skill in recognizing and synthesizing letter symbols into words (that is,

[15] M. M. Lewis, *Infant Speech* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951).

has not reached this stage, but must become aware not only of the visual shapes of letters and groups of letters but also of the sounds they symbolize before the *meaning* of the printed words can be apprehended. *It is impossible for anyone to read any more than a tiny proportion of the words of any language written down by means of an alphabet by relying solely on those vague, visual clues which are the basis of the statement that "children recognize words before they recognize letters."*

The Meaning of Letters

It seems to us, therefore, that although the unit of reading is not the letter, the unit of learning to read most certainly is. An article in *Reading Teacher* by the present authors begins with the statement: "In teaching children to read we are not teaching the meanings of words, but the meanings of letters."[16]

We went on to point out that even those who emphasize the importance of "thought getting" in reading usually take care, in preparing basic readers, to use words and sentences which are so common in the everyday language of children and adults that the children *are already familiar with their meanings.*

> No one has ever suggested that the words in Reading Primers should be words which children do not already understand or cannot pronounce. Usually great care is taken that in books for teaching children to read familiar words are presented in the simplest possible sentences. To make the whole thing easier these sentences are usually accompanied by pictures—so that the meaning of words the child already knows, in sentences he readily understands, may almost be said to spring up at him from the page.

In much of what we have written on this subject, we have stressed the fact that letters do have meanings; we have felt it necessary to do so because many educational theorists of the recent past have so stressed that aspect of reading they call "getting word-meanings" that, some by implication only, others more specifically, they deny any meaning to letters at all and deny that it is usually through this knowledge of letter-meanings that a child, when *learning* to read, works his way towards the meaning of the printed words.

Our use of the term "letter-meanings" has quite often struck some

[16] J. C. Daniels and H. Diack, "The Phonic Word Method" (*Reading Teacher*, International Reading Association. Chicago, October, 1959).

cation who have exclaimed, "But letters have *no* meanings!" They will not deny, however, that letters have a certain *significance*, or that they are *symbols* for something; and our insistence in using the term "meaning" derives from our desire to emphasize the fact that acquiring letter knowledge is intrinsic in learning to read.

What, then, is the meaning of a letter? Normally one thinks of a letter as "symbolizing" a sound, but it is more to the point in considering the question of teaching reading to think of a letter as an instruction to the reader to use his voice muscles in a particular way, the way indeed which will produce the sound that a particular letter stands for. The *s* in the word *six* is quite as definite an instruction in this sense as the command "Shoulder arms." A further part of the meaning of a letter derives from its relationship to the other letters in the printed word. Letters are written down in words in a particular and definite order, viewed left to right, and this order represents the time order, or sequence, in which the particular instructions are to be carried out.

Two main qualifications have to be made. The first is that, in our irregularly spelled English language, the letter-meanings are not wholly consistent, nor are they as simple as the original idea of alphabetical writing would lead one to expect. Sometimes, as with *th* and *sh*, two letters stand for one sound; sometimes, as with the *h* in *rhinoceros*, a letter does not carry a sound-meaning at all, but an etymological meaning; sometimes, as with the *e* in *came*, a letter does not of itself signify a sound, but signifies a change in the meaning of another letter in the same word, and here the principle of order in space representing an order in time is violated.

It follows that any effective method of teaching reading must be soundly based on recognition of the incontrovertible fact that, in English, essentially, the skill of reading is the skill of "translating" letters or groups of letters, looked at from left to right, into sounds, articulated in a given time order, that have meaning. Scientific research into causes of reading retardation combines with common sense in confirming that the main reason why teaching reading, after billions of man-hours and dollars have been expended in looking for the easy road to universal literacy, still remains a source of educational and social concern, is the deliberate neglect or side-stepping by reading theorists of the meaning of letters.

We began this chapter by asking the question: What is reading? We have shown that the answer depends upon what stage of reading

is indeed essentially a "thought getting" process; his reading ability represents an extremely versatile extension of his linguistic powers and thus of his intellectual, emotional and aesthetic growth. Through reading, his social communication has been extended to a degree which alone makes possible the complex educational-social development towards full participation in a modern industrial and democratic civilization.

But having said this, we must add that, though the unit of accomplished reading is the word, the phrase, or even the sentence, the unit of *learning* to read is the letter. These are not two contradictory, conflicting aspects of reading; the one agrees with the other. However, present anxieties about the teaching of reading stem from failure to distinguish between, and indeed actually confusing, these two aspects of the reading process.

MORTIMER SMITH is Executive Director of the Council for Basic Education. This article is reprinted from *The American Scholar*, Volume 38, Number 3, Summer 1969. Copyright © 1969 by the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa. The footnotes have been added by the author for this paper and did not appear in the original.

THE READING PROBLEM

by

Mortimer Smith

One of the occupational hazards for those of us concerned with public education is attendance at countless conferences where nowadays we are apt to sit around and deplore the fact that the schools are beset by problems. Sometimes the discussion has to do with numbers, sometimes with money or personnel. Lately it is often concerned with those revolutionary winds of doctrine that, having battered the colleges and universities, now threaten the lower schools. There is one pressing question, however, that is rarely discussed, a question that strikes at the heart of the educational enterprise. I refer to reading and how it is taught in American schools. The subject is aired, of course, at gatherings of reading specialists but almost never at general educational conferences. One reason for its absence is that the reading experts, after the manner of specialists, guard their science jealously and are apt to make the generalist feel that reading theory is so mysterious as to be beyond his ken. Dissent is slowly growing, however, among educators and laymen who are outside the reading establishment. More and more outsiders question the monolithic design for reading instruction which the specialists—centered in the schools of education, in the International Reading Association, and in the offices of textbook publishers—have fastened on the public schools. Any system, say the dissenters, that produces so many failures can't be all good.

The whole reading question is a complex one and can be presented only in bare outline in a brief article. I will attempt here to do several things: show the magnitude of reading failure; describe the dominant theory of reading instruction to which that failure can be traced; list some other factors affecting reading achievement;

and give a few reasons why there is now justification for cautious optimism about reading improvement. Perhaps as good a place as any to begin is with an outsider who told us almost fifteen years ago why Johnny can't read. Rudolf Flesch's book was a popularized and sometimes oversimplified treatment of the reading controversy but it was a tract for the times of the utmost importance. As a best-selling book it made a large public aware of the fact that the orthodox method of teaching beginning reading in American schools deliberately excludes decoding of the sounds the letters make in favor of memorizing whole words by sight. Flesch maintained that this look-and-say method is the cause of Johnny's poor reading. The reaction of the specialists to Flesch was unanimous: It was not true that Johnny was a poor reader; but if it was true, Dr. Flesch's prescription, a large dose of organized phonics, would be a ridiculous remedy. Lay critics are never looked on kindly by insiders, especially in academic and educational circles, and Flesch was pilloried with almost savage roughness.

Battle-scarred by the vehement attacks, Flesch retired from the reading wars, but the issues he raised have not gone away. Evidence that Johnny still can't read floods in upon us, from the objective data showing draft rejection rates for illiteracy to the subjective complaints of employers about the number of applicants who cannot read sufficiently to complete a simple application form. In late 1966 the California State Department of Education released the results of reading tests given to all first- and second-graders in the state, which showed these pupils "to considerable disadvantage," according to the department, when compared with national norms, which themselves are too low. The reading scores that public pressure has forced large city school systems to release show city children doing very poorly indeed in reading. Some members of the Los Angeles Board of Education have stated that reading scores in their city constitute "a crisis." In the elementary schools and junior highs in New York City one out of five pupils is two or more years behind the normal reading level. Reading problems are by no means confined to young children. Writing in 1961, and there is no reason to think things have improved since then, Jacques Barzun spoke of such problems at the graduate level: "I can say that among the highly selected graduate students in the university where I teach I find about one in ten who needs coaching in the elements of literacy—spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and diction. And these students cannot write because they cannot read."

mental or environmental handicaps, but it becomes increasingly obvious that the reading problem is largely a problem of pedagogy. School systems that have increased their remedial staffs of reading specialists two- and three-fold without making fundamental changes in the way reading is taught find that their reading scores continue to go down.[1] On the other hand, where the whole-word method has been discarded and replaced by a code-emphasis or phonics method, taught by teachers who know what they are doing, reading scores invariably improve. Perhaps in eighty-five percent of our schools children are still taught (or not taught) by the old method, a method based on theories of reading that have not changed substantially in forty years. Let us take a brief look at the philosophical, or doctrinal, underpinnings of this method.

The first article in the credo of the reading theorists proclaims belief in "reading readiness." Before the child is ready to be taught to read he must want to read, have a mental age of six or six and a half years, and have physical and emotional maturity. If these factors are not in balance, say the experts, teaching him to read may result in emotional disturbance or permanent reading retardation. Once the child is ready the teacher begins his instruction by having him learn a sight vocabulary, that is, he is asked to learn whole words by various devices of memory and association. The way the method works is described in "How Children Learn to Read" (revised edition, 1964), which is an official pamphlet of the U.S. Office of Education:

> The child learns in many ways. In his early chart reading he comes to know some words by position. He knows that *Williams Park* comes at the end of the first line in the chart story below.
>
> We went to *Williams Park.*
> We saw the swings.
> We saw the pond.
> We saw the ducks on the pond.

[1] The idea that the way to improve reading is to do more of what you are now doing has long been the position of many reading specialists. During World War II Professor E. W. Dolch, speaking for a group of reading experts (including Arthur I. Gates, William S. Gray, Nila Banton Smith, and Paul Witty), said: "To the question, 'What should the schools do about poor reading . . . the part of our young men, as shown by the tests given draftees?' the answer is very simple. The schools should keep on doing just what they are doing and do it more widely and energetically." *Elementary English Review*, XXIX, April-June, 1942. Twenty-eight years later they are still doing it—and we still have the problem of illiterate draftees.

But *Williams Park* has not only position in its favor; it has also shape and size, that is, *configuration*. The other end words, "swings" and "pond" are learned partly by position and partly by auditory memory. "We saw" is learned by position and also by matching it to the same phrase above it and below it. Likeness or *comparison* offers clues to visual memory, just as do position and configuration. Repetition tends to fix the learnings.

But even in a very simple chart story like this one the *context* is the reader's most important aid. *Williams Park*, "swings" and "pond" are remembered through their meaningful relationship to the other words; "on the pond" falls into place because when the children saw them, the ducks *were* on the pond. [Why not on the *lake* or on the *water*?]

Note that what this is describing is essentially a method of guessing, not an unlocking of a logical language code. The method's objective is to teach for meaning from the beginning whereas the advocates of phonics instruction maintain that while the ultimate purpose is to get meaning, the first step in reading must be the process of turning printed symbols into sounds. (It is estimated that about eighty-five percent of the words in the English language are phonetically consistent, and most of the balance contain phonetic elements.) The majority of the leading reading theorists are adamant in opposing systematic phonetical instruction in beginning reading, claiming that research shows it is of little value, and may even be harmful. They advocate "incidental" and "postponed," rather than organized and systematic phonics. The following quotations from recognized authorities are typical. Albert J. Harris says there is evidence "which indicates that systematic phonetic training is not helpful in the low first grade, and may well be delayed until the second grade." George D. Spache says: "The true value of phonics is as a supplementary aid to word-recognition, after the habit of recognition by shape and context has been firmly established." Nila Banton Smith, former president of the International Reading Association and generally considered a reading expert's expert, says that some children "aren't ready for concentrated teaching of phonics until the third or fourth grade." Professor Smith even postpones naming the letters, to say nothing of their sounds: "Second grade is the time when names of all the letters usually are learned. . . . Your child, however, probably won't be taught the letters of the alphabet in order in this grade. Alphabetical arrangement comes along in the latter part of the third grade or in the fourth grade. . . ."

(These quotations from Smith are contained in a pamphlet called "Sailing Into Reading: How Your Child Learns to Read in the Elementary School." This is published by the National Education Association, always an enthusiastic supporter of the antiphonics theorists.)[2]

The chief teaching vehicle for reading in American schools has long been the basal reader, invariably authored by leading exponents of the begin-with-whole-words-postpone-phonics school of thought. These readers are peopled by bloodless, sanitary characters named Dick and Jane or Jerry and Alice, whose conversation never rises above the "see-Spot-run" and "see-Puff-jump-down" variety. Indeed, the restricted vocabulary is an underlying principle of these readers. Beginning in the 1920's reading experts started to issue standardized word lists, supposedly based on the words most frequently used by children and young people. Although it has been estimated that average six-year-olds have a recognition vocabulary of about fifteen thousand words, the total number of words in the readers has to be meager because the reading method calls for learning them one by one. Writing in 1965, Arther S. Trace, Jr., pointed out that in three of the most widely used series of readers the total number of words used in the first-grade reader was 326 for Series A, 235 for Series B, and 323 for Series C. He also pointed out that "the vocabulary in the typical Dick-and-Jane type *sixth*-grade readers is less than half the recogniton vocabulary of a typical first-grader." In the "ethnic" readers recently introduced in some large cities the cast of characters has been changed from nice white children to nice *café au lait* children, but there are even fewer words than in the conventional basal readers, the claim being made that inner-city children use only half of the words found on primary-grade word lists. Some remarks of Margaret Mead are relevant here: "In the United States we often try to find out what people are doing, and then tell them that they are doing it and also that they should keep on doing it because this is what everyone of the same age or sex or class is doing. This produces a vicious circle.

[2] The opposition to phonics-based instruction on the part of many trainers of teachers was shown in the Harvard-Carnegie Reading Study (1961), conducted under the direction of Mary C. Austin. After polling reading instructors at 74 colleges and universities, the study stated: "All instructors were unalterably opposed to excessive emphasis on the teaching of phonics; and the inroads phonics-oriented reading systems are making in various school systems throughout the country are causing them great concern." *The Torch Lighters: Tomorrow's Teachers of Reading*, Harvard University Press, pages 46-47.

dren know, and each generation, living in a world where demands on vocabulary are greater than ever before, gets a little further behind."

The restricted vocabulary affects, of course, other subjects of the curriculum, such as science, English and the social studies. The authors of textbooks for these fields are guided by what the experts in reading tell them are the capacities of young people. One of the science series most widely used in the first three grades employs only 582 different words, including science terms. The teacher who must try to teach something meaningful about science with a vocabulary restricted to 582 words has his work cut out for him. The compilers of literary anthologies and the authors of history texts for the high schools consult the Thorndike word list to make sure that nothing is beyond the comprehension, or supposed comprehension, of their readers. The restricted vocabulary has also given birth to the bowdlerized classics, that is, abridged and simplified editions, guaranteed to reduce verbal strain, of such books as *A Tale of Two Cities, Swiss Family Robinson, Two Years Before the Mast* and *Moby Dick*. In the introduction to a pared-down version of *Moby Dick* we are told that an adaptation of this work has become a necessity because Melville's vocabulary "is beyond secondary school experience" and because "the shadowy symbolism" and "highly subjective" parts of the novel are only "for literary critics and research scholars." The adapter has kindly "trimmed out or simplified the more difficult parts, simplified the vocabulary, sentence structure and punctuation." *Moby Dick* without pain becomes *Moby Dick* without meaning.

The doctrines underlying the dominant reading theory, then, are a conglomerate of postponement and readiness, word guessing, "reading for meaning," the restricted vocabulary, and strong opposition to any method that maintains that the essential skill in beginning reading is translating or decoding the sounds of letters.

Because the reading experts are reluctant to admit any deficiencies in their theories, they constantly search for other causes of reading retardation, invariably finding a lack in the child rather than in the experts' theories. I have seen low achievement blamed on causes ranging from absence of books at home and too many, or too few, siblings, to TV, lack of food or sleep, and undescended testicles. At the present time we hear a great deal about "constitu-

tional disability," or "specific dyslexia," terms used to describe organic disorders (other than blindness or deafness) that cause reading difficulties. As the number of reading failures increases so do the claims for dyslexia, estimates of its incidence ranging from eight per cent of the pupil population to twenty per cent. While there is undoubtedly a small number of children who are truly dyslexic, a great many who are so diagnosed are suffering from nothing more complicated than poor classroom instruction. We know that in school systems where strong programs of organized phonics are carried on the rate of reading failure is often no more than one per cent. We know, too, that the therapy usually prescribed in the clinics dealing with the supposedly dyslexic child invariably includes phonetic analysis and drill in the sounds the letters make. If this is a good remedial device, why not use it in the schools before the child becomes a basket case?

There are, of course, other factors than methodological ones that affect reading achievement, especially in city schools. One factor is the negative attitude toward reading of people who ought to know better. Even the distinguished members of the President's National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children have demonstrated that they are not overly concerned with the essential first skill. A 1968 report of this group states:

> It may be that the important questions have not yet been formulated. For example, almost all programs, "innovative" as well as traditional, grow out of a general assumption that reading at normal grade levels is a major criterion of success. The Council does not criticize this criterion, but it does suggest that there are other possible criteria which might better measure the progress of disadvantaged children. We should perhaps be more concerned with such relatively uncharted fields as creativity, motivation for achievement, awareness of the varied world of adult work and of the male and female roles in family and society—the list of possibilities could be long and imaginative.

One does not, in turn, quarrel with the Council's perhaps rather amorphous criteria, but is it unreasonable to ask how we can measure *illiterate* students against such criteria? It seems to me that there is a definite relationship between "creativity" and the other worthy and fairly sophisticated criteria named by the Council, and reading competence.

If the Council seems lukewarm in its devotion to reading, a few philosophers of ghetto education are positively indifferent. At a conference a year ago I heard a sociologist of one of the founda-

mand that their children be taught to read, expressing the view that this is the least of their needs. Another worker in slum schools, attached to a university-sponsored project, expressed private agreement, saying that as the Negro's culture is nonverbal and tactile he has little need of literacy beyond the ability to read simple directions such as traffic signs. These open deriders of reading and books have unwitting allies in those linguists who want to make the slum child "bilingual." This school of linguists claims that there is a Negro dialect that is a valid language with a formal, if unrecorded, grammar, and they plead with the teacher not to corrupt this dialect by insisting on standard English as an exclusive language.

All of these attitudes affect the reading programs in city schools, but, when you add to them widespread defeatism (the "what-can-you-expect?" attitude of many teachers and administrators), it is little wonder that the slum child makes a poor showing in reading. Both those who say he doesn't need reading and those who suggest that he's too dumb to read contribute to an inevitable crisis in reading achievement.

One other factor needs to be mentioned in discussing low achievement: the contention of some sociologists that little can be done to improve the schools until the home and the community are improved. This pessimistic view is buttressed by the findings of the Coleman Report (*Equality of Educational Opportunity*), which concluded that "schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context." The importance of this conclusion for the instructional program and for the teacher in the slum schools, and for financial aid to the schools, cannot be overestimated. Why spend much time trying to improve the program if you can't buck the pupils' social backgrounds? Why not concentrate on making the schools surrogate homes or welfare centers rather than educational institutions? Why spend extra money on trying to educate if it is a hopeless cause? As Christopher Jencks has said: "If the Report's analysis is correct, then most of the money now being spent to improve the public schools is going down the drain."

What I have written to this point adds up, admittedly, to a gloomy picture. Despite the entrenched monopolists of reading instruction, however, light does begin to break through. Groups and individuals who have carried on the Flesch argument for systematic phonics

taking place, although some of the changes are no more radical than putting more phonics in the teacher's manual and in the promotional brochure, and dropping the revealing word lists. California has adopted for statewide use two new basal reading series that make at least some concessions to the criticisms leveled against Dick and Jane and in any case are an improvement on the readers formerly used in that state. Some book reform has been more drastic and now, fortunately, school systems can find readers that offer some alternatives to conventional methods, that stress organized phonics in the beginning, greatly increase the number of words appearing in the early grades, and vastly improve the content by the introduction of good stories, poetry and myths. There are also on the market a number of very effective auxiliary phonics methods that do not produce their own readers.[3] Another encouraging recent development is that many school systems (this includes New York City's) that formerly put only look-and-say readers on the approved list are now permitting teachers to experiment with phonics materials. Still another encouraging fact is that fewer teachers and parents accept the dictum that learning to read in the kindergarten or earlier is damaging to the infant psyche. And finally, as language scholars not only enter the field of reading research but write materials for classroom use, we are learning that reading theory does not have to be the monopoly of professors of education.

Ironically, the most dramatic boost for the phonics advocates has come from the researches of Jeanne Chall of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a member of the reading establishment in good standing. Her study called *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, published in 1967 and sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation, has been called a "bombshell" by John Gardner, who says that it shows that "the method employed in most American schools today—all the various modifications and versions of the look-say method—is *not* the better method." That is indeed Mrs. Chall's message: after reviewing over fifty years of the research and visiting hundreds of classrooms, she came to the conclusion that a phonics or code-emphasis method is more effective in teaching primary-grade children than a whole-word, reading-for-meaning method. Some of the diehards have been rather frosty toward Mrs. Chall's book,

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[3] For a listing of phonics-based readers and supplementary materials, see pages 33-35 of this paper.

within the fold, is going to filter down into many classrooms.

In our efforts to improve reading, there is still a long road to travel. After all, when the great majority of American children are still taught by a cumbersome and outmoded method that produces a startling number of reading failures, it can be said that we are only at the beginning of the journey. We know that we have at our command the means whereby most children can achieve mastery of the mechanics of reading at an early age. It is axiomatic that competence in reading is a necessary vocational skill, but it is also the means for experiencing pleasure, and even joy. If we can bring children to this joy at an early age, we may even be able to combat that idiot box that Professor McLuhan tells us is going to take over the world.

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SOME CURRENT ISSUES IN READING

by

George Weber

Dyslexia

(September 1967)

Over the past year, a number of popular magazines have published articles on dyslexia. A child is described in heart-rending terms—average or above-average intelligence, generally normal physically, behind in reading and writing, reverses or confuses letters, poor motor coordination, and emotionally upset, presumably because of his troubles with schoolwork and normal play. The anguish of the parents is elaborated. But finally, the parents turn to a certain clinic or special school and the child improves remarkably. This clinic or special school occupies the rest of the article.

Certainly there are some children who correspond to this description, children who have so much trouble reading because of some constitutional (organic) disorder (other than blindness or deafness) that they require individual, special instruction. It is certainly not true, however, that the number of such children runs into the millions, as the popular articles on dyslexia usually state. Nor is it true that all, or even a major part, of the children who do poorly at reading fall into this category.

Part of the problem is definitional. Some specialists in the field maintain that as many as twenty per cent of all people have a constitutional "language disability" or, as it has come to be called more often, "dyslexia." This may or may not be so, but certainly if one defines dyslexia as a disability so serious that it cannot be overcome by the best classroom methods of teaching reading now known, the incidence is far smaller. Using this latter definition, which is the one implied in the popular articles, the incidence is probably in the range of one-half of one per cent to one per cent, at most.

schools use the best reading instruction methods and a subsequent nationwide survey is conducted. But we can be sure that the number of children severely handicapped in this way is more like one-half of one per cent rather than eight, ten, or twenty per cent. The evidence here is overwhelming, and can be summarized as follows:

1. Over-all, the portion of young American adults who do not read at a minimum level is 15 to 20 per cent. (This range is indicated by studies of the draft rejection rates and manpower retraining program data.) But some methods of instruction, some schools, and some teachers do far better than this. One should look at the methods, schools, and teachers with the lowest rates of reading failures to get a notion of the incidence of dyslexia.
2. One such school system is Lincoln, Massachusetts, where at the end of the third grade all but 10 out of 920 pupils (1.1%) achieved a fourth-grade level of reading as the result of phonics-based group instruction. (Even the ten achieved this standard with tutoring.) In this case the job was made more difficult by transfers into the system of children without sound phonics background. (A detailed account of this reading program was published in *The Independent School Bulletin*, January 1963.) There are a number of other such schools thoughout the country.
3. Other persuasive evidence comes from Sweden. Admittedly, a different language is involved, but that language is also alphabetic, and the learning of it requires substantially the same capabilities, skills, and procedures as does the learning of English. Unless dyslexia is an organic disorder unusually prevalent in the United States, and there is no reason to believe it is, the Swedish experience is relevant and particularly interesting because it is from a different society, unbound by our educational approaches and instructional methods and free of our problems of the culturally disadvantaged. According to a report released early this year by the Swedish Information Service, only about ½ of 1% (4,400) of the 900,000 Swedish children from 7 to 16 have reading disabilities severe enough to prevent them from following the regular curriculum.

What difference does it make whether the incidence of dyslexia is 1% or 20%? We have concentrated on this question of incidence

all of the millions of American children who do not at present learn to read well were dyslexic (in the sense that they required the individual, expensive, special instruction outlined in the popular articles), American education would have a job on its hands that would cost tens of billions of dollars. Until public funds were provided for such a program, millions of American parents would be faced with the choice of spending several thousand dollars a year for special schooling or allowing their children to grow up with a very severe handicap.

Fortunately, most of our present reading problems can be solved within a normal school context and at no additional cost. In fact, improved reading instruction would actually cost less than many school systems are now spending because expensive remedial reading programs could be sharply reduced. As far down the road as we can see, we shall require competent reading clinics and special schools for the small number who are truly dyslexic. But for the great majority of our problem readers, reform in regular school reading instruction is badly needed, and should be undertaken as rapidly as possible. Popular magazines could perform a great service by calling attention to this need rather than exaggerating the incidence of constitutional language disability.

The Initial Teaching Alphabet

(June 1968)

Four years ago there was a spate of articles in the general and educational press on the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA), a new approach to teaching reading. The articles created a stir of interest among reading specialists as well as among the general public. The approach was intriguing because it went directly to the cause of most of the unavoidable difficulties in learning to read English, namely, spelling complexity and inconsistency. If each of the forty-odd sounds in spoken English were always represented in writing by the same symbol, learning to read would, of course, be far easier. ITA is such a set of symbols, but as a practical device it presented many unanswered questions. Accordingly, CBE suspended judgment on it (*CBE Bulletin*, May 1964).

Now there is enough evidence in from the various ITA experiments both here and in England to come to a tentative conclusion: ITA seems to achieve no better over-all results in the first several grades than the best of the available programs that use traditional orthog-

do not.

Sound education research is an extremely difficult and complex business. The studies on ITA are far too numerous to be examined here. Suffice to say that there are a number of studies and large-scale adoptions of ITA which seem to show that it achieves results in the early grades superior to the usual look-say approach. One would hardly expect otherwise because ITA is inherently a phonics approach (that is, one that teaches the child from the beginning that words are groups of sound-symbols, not the unique globs of the whole-word, look-say approach).

But the fundamental question is not whether ITA does a better job in the early grades than the orthodox look-say approach. It is whether it does a better job than the best presently available phonics-based systems using traditional orthography. The answer, on balance, is that it does not. Although ITA has had notable success in stimulating creative writing among young children (because as long as they use it they can ignore the spelling irregularities of English), the weaknesses of ITA more than offset this possible advantage. These weaknesses are as follows:

1. Many children entering school already know how to read (to a degree) in traditional orthography. Forcing those children through ITA is not only unnecessary but harmful.
2. Since in our country there is a great deal of transfer from school to school, a reading system with special orthography (such as ITA) that is used by only a small fraction of the schools unduly penalizes many transferring children. In this connection, many children using ITA do not transfer to traditional spelling until some time in the second grade, or even later.
3. ITA restricts the beginning reader to his ITA textbook and a limited number of other materials printed in ITA. He cannot make reading progress by watching television, passing street signs, or deciphering cereal boxes. Help by parents and brothers and sisters is virtually ruled out.
4. The need to translate many school materials into ITA is often an additional expense.
5. There is reason to have misgivings about possible undesirable vestiges, especially in spelling, after the transition to orthodox letters, even though available test results at the end of second

tion against any method of learning that necessarily involves a wholesale unlearning.

Had ITA appeared on the scene before the development of sound phonics-based approaches in traditional orthography, it would have been at least a step forward from the look-say readers. Fortunately, it did not. We believe that existing good phonics-based systems using traditional orthography are clearly preferable to ITA.

National Norms

(February 1969)

One of the most useful myths for the average suburban school principal or superintendent—and for many others, too—is the idea that the national norm on standardized achievement tests is a satisfactory performance. The citizen or school board member can be told, in response to questions about pupil performance, that the student body is up to national norms or "grade level." That reply is supposed to end the matter, and it often does.

But in many cases the national norm is not good enough. It is not good enough in some cases because the student body is above-average in intelligence or family background, or both. It is not good enough in some cases because the school system is above-average in expenditures. Finally, it is not good enough in some cases because the national norms are themselves too low.

A national norm on a standardized test is, of course, simply the average performance on that test for the entire nation, estimated at some past point in time on the basis of a limited sample on the part of the test maker. It is merely a statistical fact, and does not say whether the achievement level represented is good, bad, or indifferent.

Most suburban school systems start with children of above-average intelligence and above-average cultural background. They usually spend more money per pupil than the national average. With these resources, achieving the national norms is not success but failure. Achievement should be compared, not with national norms, but with that of similar systems elsewhere. This is exactly what the independent private schools do. Through the Educational Records Bureau in New York they develop their own norms which, as one might expect, are considerably above the public school average.

The national norms, themselves, sometimes fall short of a reasonable standard of achievement. On the eve of Sputnik, national norms

field for many years. Until recently, at least, national norms in elementary mathematics were too low. In a careful 1964 test given to 13-year-olds in twelve countries, American pupils ranked tenth, and averaged about half the score of the Japanese children.

A particularly glaring case of low norms exists in reading. Here most of the standardized tests were "normed" some years ago, at the end of a long period of Dick-and-Jane instruction. As better, phonics-based reading programs were introduced in some places, average reading attainments rose. But until the norms are revised they fail to reflect the progress made in many places. California provides a dramatic illustration. Children in the state were meeting national norms a few years ago. When the state switched to an updated test, scores were suddenly so low that they were embarrassing. California children were reading as well (or as poorly) as ever, but they had failed to make the progress that many other places had made with superior, phonics-based approaches. The ultimate proof, perhaps, that the national norms for reading are too low is the attainment of above-norm scores by P.S. 192, a ghetto school in Harlem (*CBE Bulletin*, February 1969).

Before people in a locality accept the idea that a national norm is good enough, they should ask: "Are our children average?" "Is our school expenditure average?" "What does this national norm really represent?" Whenever we accept a national norm as good enough, we are saying, by definition, that we are content to see our present level of achievement continue indefinitely.

Remedial Reading Programs

(May 1969)

Many school systems boast of their large remedial reading programs. The implication is that such a program is a mark of a good school system. Where is the parent or school board member who will ask, "If we are doing a good job of teaching reading in the first place, why do we have such a large remedial program?"

The first remedial reading center in the United States was established in Boston in 1930. The date is no coincidence. By that time the whole-word approach to reading instruction (also called the look-say or Dick-and-Jane approach) was so prevalent that the casualties were already showing up. Today, with perhaps 85 per cent of our children still subjected to this misguided method, the need for

beginning as early as the second grade, and many even in high school and college (although some are disguised as "developmental reading" or "reading improvement").

High schools and colleges are not directly responsible for the poor readers among their students. But it must be presumed that school systems, and particularly elementary schools, have brought the need for large remedial reading programs on themselves. Unless they have suffered from a very large influx of poor readers from other areas, such programs should not be a source of boasting but of shame. If reading were taught with the proper approach and sufficient emphasis, remedial reading classes would not be needed. The few children who did not learn to read adequately would be those with such severe individual problems that they would require highly specialized clinics.

Large remedial reading programs are so common that the public and most school personnel have come to accept them as normal and inevitable. That they are not is illustrated by the many schools and school systems that do not need them. Lincoln, Massachusetts, for example, found that sound phonics-based instruction reduced its problem readers to a mere one per cent. In the ghetto, Harlem's P.S. 192 eliminated its remedial classes as part of its emphasis on reading achievement in the primary grades. Large remedial reading programs are expensive and reflect a terrible toll in pupil failure and frustration. They could be eliminated if basic reading instruction were improved. A large remedial reading program is usually a mark of a bad school system.

About 100 publishers are currently offering materials for beginning reading instruction. The great majority of these programs use the look-say or whole-word approach that has been the standard one in the United States for three or four decades. It is true that all of the look-say readers introduce phonics along the way, some more fully than others, but phonics is not their basic methodology for beginning reading. All of these readers, including those which have added more phonics in their latest editions, still depend upon whole-word memorization and guessing at words from pictures and context.

The common characteristic, and the main strength, of the programs listed below is that they all use organized and explicit phonics from the outset. Some of these programs are complete reading series, and some are "supplemental" programs. These are not the only phonics programs available. They are simply the ones we consider the most effective of those which have come to our attention. Need we add that these are not teacher-proof miracle pills that will of themselves cure all reading ills? The successful use of any program is dependent on the teacher's understanding and proper use of the materials.

The following list is arranged alphabetically by publisher. The years shown are the copyright dates of the materials examined.

Behavioral Research Laboratories (Box 577, Palo Alto, California 94302). *Reading* by M. W. Sullivan, 1966-67. Twenty-four paperbound textbooks. The first textbook is teacher-administered. The last 23 are "programmed," i.e., designed for use by the pupil working by himself. A cardboard "slider" is used to cover and uncover the answers. Twenty-eight accompanying short readers contain material in story format. These materials are being widely used in large cities for both regular and remedial work in "Project Read." (A similar Sullivan series is published by Webster-McGraw Hill, Manchester Road, Manchester, Missouri 63011.)

Economy Company, The (P.O. Box 25308, 1901 North Walnut, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73125). *Phonetic Keys to Reading* by Theodore L. Harris, Mildred Creekmore, and Margaret Greenman, 1967. Seven soft-cover books to be used in grades 1-3 (3 in first grade, 2 in second, 2 in third). Teachers' manuals, phonetic cards, and other materials are also available.

as a "supplemental" series. That is, at each level these materials are used and then any basal readers are read for "practice" of "the independent reading methods which have been learned." Vocabulary and content limited.

J. B. Lippincott Company (East Washington Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19105). *Basic Reading* by Glenn McCracken and Charles C. Walcutt, 1969 (first grade) and 1964 (second and third grades). Revision of second- and third-grade materials scheduled for 1970. Complete series goes through grade 8. A hardback basal reading series. Teachers' editions, workbooks, films, word recognition cards, and achievement tests are also available. Content emphasizes classical literature (folk and fairy tales, legends, poems, fables). (Note: The Lippincott program grew out of research sponsored by the Council for Basic Education in the early 1960's. The Council has no editorial or other control over this series but receives a small fraction of the royalties from its sale. In the judgment of the Council, it would be unfair to let this interest stand in the way of including the Lippincott readers in this list of effective phonics programs.)

Modern Curriculum Press (13900 Prospect Road, Cleveland, Ohio 44136). *Phonics is Fun* by Louis Krane, 1963 (1); 1964 (2); 1968 (3). A series of three soft-cover text-workbooks for grades 1-3. Teachers' manuals, three pre-primer readers to use with Book 1, and other materials are also available. A "supplementary" program intended for use with any basal readers. Vocabulary and content limited.

William Morrow & Company (105 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016). *The Writing Road to Reading* by Romalda Bishop Spalding with Walter T. Spalding, 1969. This book for teachers, first published in 1957, fully explains a program of teaching reading through writing. Phonogram cards, records of phonogram sounds, and 24 hours of tape-recorded lessons for teachers are also available. There are no reading books for pupils; the program is "supplemental," intended for use with any readers or reading material appropriate for young children.

Open Court Publishing Company (Box 599, LaSalle, Illinois 61301). *Open Court Readers* by Arther S. Trace, Jr., Marianne Carus et al., 1965 (first year, first semester); 1967 (1:2 through 3:1); and 1964 (3:2). A complete basal series through

Content emphasizes classical literature (folk and fairy tales, legends, poems, fables).

PHONOVISUAL PRODUCTS, INC. (12216 Parklawn Drive, Rockville, Maryland 20852). *Phonovisual Method* by Lucille D. Schoolfield and Josephine B. Timberlake, 1960, and *Textbook for Teachers* by Edna Burrows Smith, 1971. These books fully explain the method, which is designed for kindergarten and primary grades and can also be used for remedial work. The books and two wall charts (consonants and vowels) comprise the basic materials for this program. Optional workbooks, a game book, skill-building cards, and additional materials for use in training teachers are also available. The program is "supplemental," intended for use with any readers or reading material appropriate for young children.

AUCKERMAN, ROBERT C.: *Approaches to Beginning Reading*, John Wiley & Sons, 1971, 509 pp. Excluding any mention of the old-established look-say programs, the author lists and describes about 100 programs, mostly phonics-based, and summarizes research studies on each program.

CHALL, JEANNE: *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967, 372 pp. A study of the relevant research from 1912 to 1965 by a professor of education at Harvard, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation. Concludes that the code-emphasis (phonics) approach produces better results than the reading-for-meaning (look-say) approach.

DYKSTRA, ROBERT: "Four Types of Primary Reading Programs: A Comparative Study," *The National Elementary Principal*, April 1968, pp. 50-56. Reviews the 27 U.S. Office of Education reading studies and concludes, among other things, that "pupils enrolled in the phonics-first basal series were superior in every phase of achievement measured at the end of the second grade" to pupils using the conventional (look-say) series.

FLESCH, RUDOLF: *Why Johnny Can't Read—And What You Can Do About It*, Harper & Brothers, 1955, 222 pp. Although technically weak in some respects, this book first brought public attention to the failure of the look-say approach and caused a sensation when it appeared.

FRAIBERG, SELMA: "The American Reading Problem," *Commentary*, June 1965, pp. 56-65. A professor of child psychoanalysis surveys the educational damage done by look-say readers.

GURREN, LOUISE, and ANN HUGHES: "Intensive Phonics vs. Gradual Phonics in Beginning Reading: A Review," *The Journal of Educational Research*, April 1965, pp. 339-46. A review of 22 rigorous research comparisons between "intensive phonics" and "gradual phonics" (look-say) finds that 19 favored phonics, 3 favored neither method, and none favored look-say.

JOHNSON, MARY: *Programmed Illiteracy in our Schools*, Clarity Books (Box 92, Station C, Winnipeg, Canada), 1970, 170 pp. A remarkable story of one woman's discovery of the harm done by faulty methods of teaching reading and of her crusade to inform the public about the situation.

MATTHEWS, MITFORD M.: *Teaching to Read, Historically Considered*, University of Chicago Press, 1966, 216 pp. A well-known lexicographer traces the history of reading instruction.

PARKER, DON H., FREDERIC R. WALKER, and ELIZABETH C. PARKER: "Are We Teaching Creative Spelling?" *Elementary English*, May 1963, pp. 523-28. An explanation of why poor spelling is related to a lack of training in phonics.

TERMAN, SIBYL, and CHARLES CHILD WALCUTT: *Reading: Chaos and Cure*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1958, 285 pp. The situation is not as bad as when this book was written, but it is still worthwhile reading for teachers and parents.

TRACE, ARTHER S., JR.: *Reading Without Dick and Jane*, Henry Regnery Company, 1965, 186 pp. The case against Dick and Jane (look-say) readers is stated accurately and with thorough documentation.

WALCUTT, CHARLES C. (editor): *Tomorrow's Illiterates: The State of Reading Instruction Today*, Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1961, 168 pp. A series of eight essays on reading instruction. Chapter II, by Daniels and Diack, is reprinted in this *Occasional Paper*.

WALCUTT, CHARLES C., with JOHN C. DANIELS and HUNTER DIACK: *Your Child's Reading: A Guide for Parents Who Want to Help*, Cornerstone Library, 1964, 142 pp. A popular explanation of the difficulties caused by the look-say approach and a guide for parents who want to teach their children to read at home.

WEBER, GEORGE: "Inner-City Children Can Be Taught to Read: Four Successful Schools," Council for Basic Education, 1971, 35 pp. The four successful programs, described in detail, use phonics to a much greater extent than do most inner-city schools.

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